Global Student Mobility: Trends and New Directions

Rajika Bhandari and Raisa Belyavina

Rajika Bhandari is deputy vice president for research and evaluation at the Institute of International Education, and Raisa Belyavina is a senior research officer at the institute. E-mail: RBhandari@iie.org. This article draws upon their two recent publications: R. Bhandari, and P. Blumenthal, *International Students and Global Mobility in Higher Education: National Trends and New Directions.* Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011; and R. Bhandari, R. Belyavina, and R. Gutierrez, *Student Mobility and the Internationalization of Higher Education: National Policies and Strategies from Six World Regions.* Institute of International Education, New York, 2011.

Over the last decade, the number of students traveling to another country in pursuit of higher education increased by 65 percent, totaling over 3.3 million students in 2008. Although the phenomenon of student mobility itself is not new, the rapid growth in recent years has changed the global landscape of international education. As more individuals seek out "nontraditional" educational experiences abroad and new and emerging host countries compete for international talent, the historical movement of students from the global South to the North and East to West is now significantly more multidirectional. The "brain drain" of talent from developing nations is shifting to "brain gain," as many emerging host countries implement policies to recruit students; and "brain

circulation" as students continue to pursue more diverse and multinational educational experiences.

TRADITIONAL HOSTS AND NEW PLAYERS

Although Anglophone and western European countries continue to attract the highest numbers of international students, new and emerging hosts are vying for a place in the global market of international education. Jordan has set a goal of hosting 100,000 international students by 2020; Singapore aspires to 150,000 by 2015; and Japan plans on hosting 300,000 by 2025. Yet, by far the most ambitious goal is set by China, which aims to have 500,000 international students by 2020. According to *Project Atlas* (www.iie.org/projectatlas), there were over 265,000 international students studying in China in 2010—including both degree students and nondegree students enrolled in study-abroad programs through their home institutions. To meet its goal, China has taken significant strides to improve institutional capacity to host international students and has earmarked scholarship funds specifically for international students.

This policy change among the "suppliers" of international students (countries like India and China) to attract more international students poses a challenge for developing countries that are poised to become popular study destinations. Developing countries may face the dilemma of increasing the capacity of their higher education systems—to provide adequate opportunities for their expanding college-age population—while also accommodating incoming international students and engaging an international educational exchange necessary in today's globally competitive world.

At the same time, many top-host countries continue to address the challenge of "pushing" more of their students to study abroad. As international understanding and intercultural skills become critical for the modern global workforce, it is increasingly important for students to have international experience. However, due to a variety of factors both at the receiving and sending end, the number of students from Anglophone and western European countries who study overseas has not kept pace with the ambitious goals of countries hoping to host them.

REDEFINING MOBILITY

One of the most significant shifts in recent years, the definition of mobility itself has evolved from a more traditional geographic mobility—to one in which students, higher education institutions, and education programs are all mobile. Information itself has become mobile in the form of distance and virtual learning. These shifts are most evident in the advent of the branch campus model and, more recently, in the emergence of regional education hubs—such as, Dubai's Knowledge Village, Qatar's Education City, and Singapore's Global Schoolhouse.

These nontraditional forms of mobility have significant implications for domestic and international higher education. As prospective international students choose branch campuses located in their own countries over the institution's home campus, traditional student mobility, as we know it, might decline. Conversely, possibly these diverse forms of internationalization will continue to grow rapidly, serving different types of students with varying educational needs.

IS ENGLISH THE LINGUA FRANCA OF MOBILITY?

A key driver for studying overseas is the acquisition of a new language. But despite the growing popularity of foreign languages, it is indisputable that English drives much of today's student mobility. It is not a coincidence that the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada—all Anglophone countries—attract a large number of international students. At the same time, many European countries are strategically offering an increasing number of courses and even entire programs of study in English. But this change and the growing dominance of English in non-Anglophone countries come at a price. It is likely to lead to a slow erosion of a country's native language(s), defeating one of the fundamental purposes of a global education: for students to widen their global knowledge and awareness, by immersing themselves in unfamiliar languages and cultures.

There are many developments underway that will likely have an impact on global student flows in the near future. For example, Sweden is already beginning to see the impact of newly implemented tuition policies for international students, and the United Kingdom and Australia are also feeling the impact of new immigration and higher education policies. All of these rapidly occurring developments in mobility are forcing international educators to think about student mobility in new ways, while also posing unique challenges and opportunities for measuring mobility trends.